

# RUSSIAN RIVER RECORDER

FALL 2019 • ISSUE 144

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## WINE ROOTS of HEALDSBURG

LOCAL WINE AGRICULTURE TO PROHIBITION





## In This Issue

In connection with our 2019 Museum exhibition, this issue of the *Russian River Recorder* highlights the dynamic years of the local wine industry before Prohibition—a far different wine era than today. Our research on Healdsburg’s “Wine Roots” focused on the people, companies, tools and technology of early winemaking. Retired Sonoma County Wine librarian Bo Simons, the co-curator of our exhibition, helped expand our knowledge base considerably.

The roots of Healdsburg wine agriculture were planted in the 1840s, but the wine industry that followed was nurtured, improved and sustained by those who followed. Most of the pioneer grape growers hailed from the eastern U.S., although in the 1860s they were joined by French and German farmers with long histories of wine grape production in their native lands. Beginning in the late 1880s and continuing through the 1930s, immigrants from Lucca, Italy, another region known for wine production, moved to Sonoma County, bringing their agricultural and cultural traditions to their new homes.

The northern Sonoma County wine industry endured drought, floods, disease, overplanting, Phylloxera and Prohibition. This issue explores these

topics in a variety of voices. Bo Simons provides a historical overview of the major issues and challenges faced by the early winemakers. Bo also helped Museum Curators Holly Hoods and Lauren Carriere compile a timeline highlighting many of the winemakers and wineries who participated in the early local wine industry. Some of the challenges they faced are underscored in the oral history of influential winemaker Antonio Perelli-Minetti, as excerpted by Museum staff member Jane Bonham. The late Perry Beeson penned a brief manuscript about the 19<sup>th</sup> century Paxton Winery, a gravity-fed winery designed by distinguished winery architect Hamden McIntyre and built in Dry Creek on the Madrona Knoll Rancho (now Madrona Manor). Tracing the history of the old tin barn that is now part of Wilson Winery offers another perspective of our local winemaking history. We close with a fascinating piece by Bo Simons about the Italian Swiss Colony and its promoter Andrea Sbarbaro.

We hope you enjoyed the exhibition and will find this companion issue of the *Russian River Recorder* illuminating.

Holly Hoods, Executive Director/Curator  
Pamela Vana-Paxhia, Editor



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# Healdsburg's Wine Roots: So Far From What We Know

by Bo Simons

*If you walk down the aisle of a well stocked liquor store, wine shop or supermarket today, especially here in the heart of wine country, you are inundated with a huge array of wine. So many Sonoma County wines are approachable, well made and handsomely packaged that the consumer is likely to be intimidated by the vast selection. With all this bounty, it is difficult to imagine what wine and winemaking were like the early days in and around Healdsburg.*

## **Mission Wine Making Methods**

In the Mission and Rancho days of California history, grape crushing was done on sloping ground covered with cowhides, hair side down. Variations on this Mission era crush pad included cowhides stitched together and draped over wooden platforms or stitched cowhides suspended on poles to form a trough.

Indians did the sticky, tiresome crushing with their feet. The workers, sometimes only men, sometimes men, women and children, climbed on to these grapes piled several feet high and then trod them by foot, clad only in breechclouts. Sometimes they used poles to balance on the mounds.

The juice ran freely down the slopes for collection in leather bags, earthen jars or wooden buckets. The contents were then emptied into larger wooden casks or leather containers.

After the grapes had been thoroughly trod, the pile of crushed grapes was emptied into the wooden casks with the juice. This latent wine called "must" was transformed into wine by fermentation.

The long fermentations took place in a specially designated building or room. No prepared yeast was added to the must. (In modern winemaking, most commercial wine is made with specially prepared cultured and inoculated yeasts.) This was well before Louis Pasteur's 1857 observation of the role of yeast in turning the sugars in grape juice into the alcohol of wine.

All wine fermentation occurred with whatever wild yeasts were present on the grapes or in the air. This method was the standard practice since wine was first made in 6,000 BCE. Fermentations with wild yeasts were unpredictable. It often ceased or "got stuck" before all the sugar turned to alcohol.

In the Mission and Rancho cellars, long fermentation sometimes lasted three months. When, as often occurred because of the primitive methods, fermentations stuck, the resulting wine was sticky sweet with residual sugar.

Pressing seems to have been optional in Mission and Rancho-era winemaking. Pressing involves squeezing and straining out the skins, seeds and stems out of the crushed grapes. Some was probably barreled or casked with the seeds, stems and skins still part of the must.

## **Mission Grapes**

The Mission grape is one of few wine grapes that could be made either into a red or white wine. When white wine was made, the grapes were usually pressed right after they were crushed or just pressed directly. They probably had some means of pressing or straining.

Although basket press technology replaced foot treading and the huge horizontal wine presses sometime in the late middle ages in Germany and France, most Mission era winemaking lacked the classic basket wine presses until the 1820s.

In the Missions, wine was used for communion, a necessary part of mission life. On the Ranchos, the rather bad wine that resulted from Mission grapes and their crude production methods was often just a stage in the production of brandy usually called "aguardiente" ("tooth water" because it took the enamel off your teeth).

The white wine based variant of this early sticky sweet wine was called Angelica. In this process, the aguardiente was poured on the half-fermented wine must, the process of port wine making. The yeast was killed by alcohol and the



resulting wine had high levels of sweetness because of the unfermented sugar.

Many early travelers had little good to say about California wine, but they seemed to love Angelica. While much of the unfortified early California wine did not age particularly well, Angelica did.

### **Rancho Era Winemaking**

In 1841, when Healdsburg pioneer Cyrus Alexander built a home for Captain Henry Fitch, his boss and the new owner of Sotoyome Rancho, winemaking emerged from the Mission phase and into the Rancho era. Not yet at the stage where it qualified as an industry, winemaking still existed as a pioneer subsistence economy. The same crude methods were employed, perhaps with the addition of some basket presses and cooperage.

Wine was made from locally grown grapes, but it was a small part of a rough life. Wine and brandy were used for barter: trade a barrel of aguardiente for a horse. Wine rarely saw the inside of a bottle or glass. It usually went from barrel to leather bag to wooden or tin cup to mouth.

Cyrus Alexander moved to the valley that would later bear his name and sent his man Frank Bedwell to Fort Ross to get cuttings. Bedwell climbed the redwood fence that protected the orchard and vines from predators and took some cuttings.

Accounts are unclear, but some speculate that in addition to seeds and cuttings for fruit trees, Bedwell brought back grape cuttings. If he did, perhaps this was the start of viticulture in Northern Sonoma County.

The vines had been planted at Fort Ross in 1817 or 1818, several years before the 1823 planting at Sonoma Mission. The Russians had obtained cuttings of Mission grapevines from Peru. Thus, in Sonoma County, unlike every other Mission county, the first to plant wine grapes were the Russians, not the Spanish Franciscans who founded the missions.

### **1870s Winemaking**

Skip ahead in time to when the Simi Brothers started making wine and selling it. Giuseppe and Pietro Simi began as fruit vendors and grocers both in San Francisco and Healdsburg in the 1870s or earlier. They branched into making wine and selling

it through their outlets in San Francisco. At first, none of their wine saw the inside of a bottle.

Bottling was rare in the early days. Only the very pricey wine was put in bottles. Much of the wine produced in Healdsburg in the early days of the industry was sold in bulk or at retail without the benefit of a glass bottle.

Simi's wine went from the fermenting vat to an aging barrel. The barrel went to their store or was sold to another store, bar or restaurant. The consumer would bring his own jug or demijohn and have it filled at the point of sale.

### **Increased Sophistication in Selling, Marketing**

Changes rattled though the Healdsburg wine scene. Italian Swiss Colony achieved enormous size and scale in the 1880s, and they really initiated the selling of wine in bottles in Sonoma County. They made famous one very distinctive bottle, a raffia-covered little rounded bottle that came to signify their fine Tipo brand, Chianti-style wine.

While Simi Winery and other Healdsburg producers sold much of their production in bulk or into customer's own containers, they were starting to bottle more before Prohibition.

Simi also developed a marketing department that cut a deal with the Del Monte Hotel in Monterey, and started to market its Del Monte Hotel-labeled, Simi wine to the benefit of both companies.

People in area wineries were becoming second and third generation winemakers, and local wineries started earning medals in Paris and London.

### **Prohibition and Beyond**

Prohibition closed down the legal part of the wine industry in Healdsburg. It also had some other unintended consequences. The increasing availability of other varietals, the increasingly sophisticated wine making techniques and basic cleanliness in the winery all came to thundering halt.

Varieties shrank down to those that could be hauled in box cars and made into wine thousands of miles away or in unclean vats of dirty barns run in secret. The wine was artificially sweetened with sticky additives to mask its flaws and appeal to soda pop tastes of the 1920s consumer.

Even after repeal it would be a long hard crawl in an industry that remembered it knew how to make good wine.



# Wine Timeline

## *An Overview of Healdsburg, Russian River Valley, Alexander Valley and Dry Creek Before Prohibition*

*by Bo Simons, Holly Hoods and Lauren Carriere*

*Healdsburg and the surrounding valleys share a common history of wine agriculture that dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Winemaking was ubiquitous in northern Sonoma County before 1920. This timeline highlights key early pioneer winemakers and many of the early wineries impacted by Prohibition.*

### **Healdsburg Area**

1837 – Cyrus Alexander, a fur trapper from Pennsylvania, met Captain Henry Fitch in San Diego. Alexander was hired to manage Fitch's Sotoyome Rancho, a Mexican land grant of 48,800 acres in what is now Healdsburg and Alexander Valley. Alexander built an adobe house for Fitch near where Bailhache Avenue lies today.

1841 and 1846 – Sotoyome Rancho was officially awarded by the Mexican government in two grants to Fitch, who never lived there.

By 1851 – Fitch's widow, Josefa Carrillo de Fitch, moved her family to Healdsburg where her sons-in-law continued operating the farm. Later, their land included vineyards.

1856 – Josefa Fitch's daughter, Josephine (also called "Josefa"), brought a dowry of one-third of the original Sotoyome Rancho grant to her marriage to John Bailhache.

1862 – George Miller built Sotoyome Winery on West Street (Healdsburg Avenue). It was Healdsburg's first in town winery.

1873 – John Chambaud built a stone winery at Front and Hudson Streets.

By 1875 – Jirah Luce planted Mission, Zinfandel, Chasselas and Riesling grapes.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Chambaud Winery building, corner of Front and Hudson Streets, c. 1904 - 1910*

1876 – Chambaud Winery was sold to brothers Giuseppe and Pietro Simi.

1877 – George Miller sold Sotoyome Winery to E.S. De Wiederhold.

1880 – Finlayson Winery was built on Grove Street.

By 1880 – Bailhache planted 65 acres of Zinfandel and Riesling grapes. John D. Grant, another of Josefa Fitch's sons-in-law, farmed 40 acres of Zinfandel.

1882 – De Wiederhold sold Sotoyome Winery to Peter Gobbi.

By 1883 – Richard E. Lewis had 75 acres of grapes, mostly Zinfandel, in the Westside Road area.

About 1886 – Martino Scatena built Scatena Winery in the Lytton Springs area.

1889 – John Bailhache converted an old adobe ranch building into a winery.

1890 – L. Dotta Winery was built one mile north of Healdsburg.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Wine storage at Roma Winery, c. 1900*



1890 – Scatena and his cousins built a large winery on Grove Street north of Grant Street (currently Seghesio Family Winery) and named it Roma Wine Company.

1890 – The Simi brothers outgrew the winery at Front and Hudson Streets and built a stone winery two miles north of Healdsburg. They named it Montepulciano Winery.

1896 – Foppiano Vineyards was founded by Giovanni Foppiano.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Oliveto Winery built in 1902*

1902 – Oliveto Winery was built at West Street and Powell Avenue.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Laurel Springs Winery entrance, 1905*

1902 – John Gaddini built Laurel Springs Winery on Chiquita Road. The winery burned in 1910.

1908 – Redwood Vineyard Winery was established one mile north of Healdsburg.

1910 – Sodini Winery was built on Limerick Lane.

1911 – Roma Winery built an addition to its Healdsburg facility.

1916 – Battista Pedroncelli Winery was built on Old Redwood Highway, south of Healdsburg.

### **Alexander Valley**

1837 – Cyrus Alexander came to manage Henry Fitch's 48,800-acre Sotoyome Rancho land grant in what is now Sonoma County. Alexander claimed prime land in the valley in exchange for four years of service to Fitch.

1843 – Cyrus Alexander sent employee Frank Bidwell and a Native American guide 45 miles to Fort Ross to gather seeds and sprouts for planting. Grapes were likely to have been included in the collection.

Spring, 1846 – Cyrus Alexander planted grapevines, apples and peaches from cuttings and seeds obtained from Fort Ross, per E.H. Kraft's 1876 manuscript.

1865 – Charles W. Matthews, a Tennessean who had come to California during the Gold Rush, was one of the first to grow grapes in this fertile area. He acquired nearly 600 acres on the west side of the river, along Reservation Road, where he first planted Mission grapes and later replaced them with nearly 40 acres of Zinfandel.

1875 – Shadrach Osborn, an Englishman, purchased more than 300 acres northeast of the intersection of Highway 128 and Chalk Hill Road and named his estate Lone Pine Ranch. He began his vineyard with Mission grapes, but soon added better varieties.

Late 1870s – Numerous other vineyards dotted the valley.

By 1883 – William Mulligan, Cyrus and Rufina Alexander's son-in-law, had established a 380-acre vineyard on wife Margaret's share of the Alexander estate. It was the largest in the valley with approximately half planted to Zinfandel and the rest largely to Riesling, Chasselas and Burger grapes.



1885 – Ludwig C. Michelson, a German from Hanover, bought 75 acres along Chalk Hill Road, a half mile off Highway 128 from Osborn. Michelson added Carignane, Grey Riesling and Grosseblau to the established vineyard.

In 1880s – Robert R. Givens set out a 54-acre vineyard of Zinfandel and Chasselas, a contemporary with the Mulligan vineyard. Givens, like his neighbors, was obligated to haul his grapes at vintage time to Healdsburg or Geyserville. As president of the Healdsburg Viticultural Society, he advocated that when grapes are crushed near where they are grown, more care is taken.

By 1890 – Mulligan's vineyard (though still highly productive) was owned by the Bank of Healdsburg. Perhaps Mulligan suffered financial misfortunes in the late 1880s.

About 1891 – Michelson built a stone winery with a capacity of over ten thousand gallons on the 75 acres he purchased from Osborn.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection  
*Red Winery, Broder Frellson winemaker*

1892 – Horace B. Chase built Stag's Leap Winery near Sausal Creek at the intersection of Alexander Valley and Red Winery Roads. Chase also owned a large estate in the hills above Yountville, Napa County, which he also called Stag's Leap. He leased approximately 150 acres of the old Mulligan vineyard from the Bank of Healdsburg. He purchased three acres on which he erected a large frame winery. He painted the

building red, so in later years it was often referred to as the Red Winery.

1892 – Shadrach Osborn had 140 acres in vines, including a considerable planting of Riesling and Chasselas grapes.

1894 – Chase, having built up a significant overseas business, was shipping to the German port of Bremen. The Stag's Leap vintages totaled more than 200,000 gallons.

1895 – Eugene F. Pratt of Napa County, with his brother-in-law George Teal, erected a 200,000-gallon capacity frame winery on the Osborn property. The winery operated for just a few years.

1898 – Thomas Meek, the son of a pioneer sawmill operator from San Bernardino, built his Soda Rock Winery on the west side of Highway 128, about one mile north of Michelson and Osborn.

About 1900 – Broder Frellson, a Danish immigrant, set out a vineyard two miles north of Alexander Valley Road, where Highway 128 crossed Gird Creek. Frellson learned winemaking at the Napa Valley Wine Company and worked as a winemaker for Horace Chase at Stag's Leap. Shortly after setting out his vines, Frellson was killed in an accident on the ranch. His plans to build his own winery were never realized.

1905 – The wine and brandy firm Lachman & Jacobi took over Stag's Leap and operated it until 1916. They shipped all their wine in puncheons (500-liter barrels) by rail from nearby Lytton for bottling at their winery in Petaluma.

By 1910 – Tom Meek planted 200 acres of his land surrounding the winery to resistant rootstock and was leasing an additional 150 acres of vineyard. His annual vintages, all white wines, averaged 200,000 gallons.

Before Prohibition – Michelson discontinued winemaking. The winery building was sold and remodeled into a dwelling. It stood until 1948, when it was gutted by fire. The remaining vines were torn out and the land turned to turkey farming.

1933 – Tom Meek's stone winery was purchased by Abele Ferrari of the Healdsburg Machine Shop. In 1960, it was the only active winery in Alexander Valley. Today Soda Rock Winery is owned by Ken and Diane Wilson of Wilson Artisan Wines.



## Dry Creek Valley

Early to Present – The Dry Creek Band of Pomo Indians lived in the Dry Creek (Mihikaune/Mihilakawna) area for thousands of years.

1851 – José German Piña was the first Mexican to settle the area. He was born at Mission San Francisco. Piña petitioned for a land grant just north of Captain Henry Fitch's Sotoyome Rancho. The four square league (approximately 17,000 acres) Rancho Tzabaco grant was issued to Piña on October 14, 1843. He was 14 years old at the time.

1851 – Charles Lambert arrived in Dry Creek Valley from Virginia. He was one of the first white settlers to come to the valley.

1856 – Samuel O. Heaton, a Kentucky pioneer, established the first sizeable planting of grapes in Dry Creek Valley. He grew Mission, Grey Riesling and Grenache grapes.

1856 – D.D. Phillips planted fruit trees and grapevines in alternating rows on his land. The purpose was crop diversification.

1860 – New York native Davenport Cozzens likely came to California through his service in the U.S. Army during the war with Mexico. He settled in Dry Creek Valley and was listed as the first wine producer in the valley.

1860 – Lambert acquired 110 acres of land, some of which he used for vineyards.

1864 – A.J. Galloway planted what may have been Dry Creek Valley's first vineyard at Table Grove Ranch on Dry Creek Road.

1869 – The Transcontinental Railroad was completed. This change allowed California grape growers and producers better access to East Coast markets.

1872 – Bloch and Colson, or Dry Creek Winery, was the first commercial winery in Dry Creek Valley. It was the second winery in Sonoma County north of Santa Rosa. Of French descent, Georges Bloch came to Sonoma County in 1856. He sensed a strong wine industry was going to develop in the area and planted Zinfandel and Mission grapes. After immigrating to the U.S., Frenchman Alexandre Colson dabbled in various occupations. Colson eventually went into business with Bloch in Dry Creek Valley.

1872 – San Francisco and Northwest Pacific (SF&NP) Railway's depot was built in Geyserville.

1885 – Former gold miner Charles Dunz opened up the largest winery in Dry Creek Valley, Laurel Hill Winery. It could produce up to 70,000 gallons of wine. The main grape grown on the 75-acre vineyard was Zinfandel.

1886 – Galloway had 60 acres of vines on the 120-acre ranch. He grew Zinfandel, Sauvignon Vert and Burger varieties.

1886 – German-born Conrad Wagele built the fifth winery in Dry Creek Valley. While most people in Dry Creek Valley were growing Zinfandel, Wagele focused on Chasselas and Riesling.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Wagele Winery*

1887 – John Paxton of Madrona Knoll Rancho (today Madrona Manor) planted grapes and hired Hamden McIntyre, one of California's most prominent winery architects to design his winery. The building was almost completely destroyed in the 1906 earthquake.

1888 – Louis Jaffe built a winery and in 1890 became the first in Dry Creek Valley to produce kosher wine.

1889 – Dry Creek Valley had 11 wineries with a combined capacity of approximately 350,000 gallons.

1890 – Swiss immigrant Andrew Frei bought Charles Dunz's Laurel Hill Winery and Ranch. He renamed it Frei Winery. Frei turned the business over to his two sons, Walter and Louis. In 1903, the winery was officially named Frei Brothers. The business survived Prohibition and is still active today under E. & J. Gallo Winery ownership.

1905 – John Canata opened a winery with a 50,000 gallon capacity on Canyon Road. John Pedroncelli of Pedroncelli Winery purchased the Canata winery in 1927. The Pedroncelli family continues to operate a winery at this location today.

1907 – Domencio Lencioni opened his winery in Dry Creek Valley in the 7400 block of West Dry Creek Road. His son Angelo Lencioni



opened his winery the same year on Lytton Springs Road.

1907 – John Reiners started a 100,000 gallon winery at 4980 Dry Creek Road.

1908 – The Del Carlo Winery opened at 9512 West Dry Creek Road. The winery made only a red blend using Zinfandel, Petit Sirah and a touch of Burger.

1909 – George Kunz built a winery at 1960 Dry Creek Road for Ernest Gaddini, the former owner of Laurel Springs Winery. Gaddini partnered with Daniel Scatena, Eugenio Massoni and Eustaquio “Gino” Belli to operate as Healdsburg Wine Company.

1915 – Paul Stefani opened a 120,000 gallon winery on Canyon Road.

1916 – S. Pieroni opened the last winery in Dry Creek Valley before Prohibition. The Pieroni Winery was located next door to Angelo Lencioni’s property on Lytton Springs Road.

### **Prohibition, 1919-1933**

By 1915, Sonoma County had reclaimed the ranking as California’s “leading dry wine producing county” from Napa County. Nearly half of the production came from the Healdsburg area.

This dominance was soon to change, however, for on October 28, 1919, the U.S. Congress passed the Volstead Act, making it illegal to produce or sell alcoholic beverages except for family production and use. Prohibition wreaked havoc on this thriving early wine industry.

Home winemaking became a major industry. While deep red Alicante Bouche and Grand Noir grapes were the most popular grapes in the eastern U.S., most of the Zinfandel was sold in San Francisco. Grape prices reached a new high and vineyards were planted in abundance. Acreage across the state reached a record level of 648,000 acres.

It was a different story for the vintners, however, as they were stuck with thousands of gallons of the 1919 vintage in their wineries. Some turned to bootlegging, while others sold sacramental wine. Several wineries burned under suspicious circumstances with the owners collecting on insurance claims. Most wineries closed down, never to reopen. Simi Winery, Italian Swiss Colony, Frei Brothers, Canata Winery (now Pedroncelli Winery),

Healdsburg Wine Company, Peironi Winery and Del Carlo were among the few able to reopen.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*John Reiners and Dry Creek grapegrowers, 1918*

Grape growers sold more grapes at better prices in the early 1920s through the “fruit juice” clause of the Volstead Act. During the Depression, grape demand plummeted. Prices fell and farmers began pulling vines and planting orchards of French and Imperial prunes. By 1929, Healdsburg was aptly described as “the Buckle of the Prune Belt.”

During Prohibition, much more wine was supposedly made at home than in wineries. Because it was cheap and considered exotic, red jug wine and other forms of alcoholic beverages became more commonly consumed. Americans drank an annual 156 million gallons, compared to 55 million prior to Prohibition. In the end, Prohibition probably did more to establish a widely based use of wine in the U.S. than all the previous years of organized promotion work.

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Source: Perelli-Minetti Family

*Antonio Perelli-Minetti, 1907 and 1969*



Source: Catherine Harroun

## **Antonio Perelli-Minetti: The Dean of California Winemakers**

*by Jane Bonham*

The son of a prominent Italian winemaker, Antonio Perelli-Minetti (1882-1976), arrived in the United States in 1901, one year after he graduated from the Royal Institute of Viticulture and Enology in Italy. He came to California to work for Italian Swiss Colony in 1902 and was directly involved in the California wine industry, except in the Prohibition years (1910-1917) when he lived in Mexico “in grape growing, winemaking and adventure.”

His reminiscences, collected in 1969 by Ruth Teiser for the California Wine Industry Oral History Project, include “his unconventional points of view and interpretations of events” but also reflect “a man of unusual charm and vitality” with his “little” stories from bygone times—some of which are included here.

During the pre-Prohibition years, he associated with several wineries—the old California Wine Company, the Simi family firm and some property near Healdsburg previously owned by Frank Schmidt. In 1929 Perelli-Minetti was one of the

organizers of Fruit Industries, Ltd., and continued with that group when it reorganized as the California Wine Association, a cooperative, until 1971 when it was acquired by A. Perelli-Minetti & Sons. Perelli-Minetti was associated with virtually all of the state's wine industry leaders, and he worked with many of them, including P.C. Rossi, A.R. Morrow, Joseph Di Giorgio and Secondo Guasti.

### **Getting Established**

In 1902, the young man traveled by train to the west, stopping in San Francisco where he went to work for Italian Swiss Colony. Pietro Rossi, one of the Colony founders and president at the time, told him that “his diploma meant nothing in the United States; what meant something was the performance of the individual himself.” Perelli-Minetti started with basic tasks, like washing and mending barrels, and worked his way up over the following six months; only then would his employers send him to Asti as assistant winemaker, shipping clerk and timekeeper.



Perelli-Minetti worked there from June 1902 until February 1903. As he tells it, "there's a little story to the case."

*The crushing season started I think in August. During the grape season Asti employed a weighmaster, a name I can never forget, Shirley Black... Mr. Rossi and Mr. Sbarboro were together, and I think Mr. Allegrini, too. I said to Mr. Rossi: "I have a man by the name of Shirley Black, but nobody has told me how much his wage is."*

*So, Mr. Rossi said to me, "\$125 a month. You know, he is American, and if we don't pay them good wages, they criticize us." I said to myself, "I am in the wrong church. I am getting \$75 a month because I am Italian and the other fellow's getting \$125 a month because he is American." So, Mr. Rossi must have seen the muscles in my face work. I didn't say anything. He was going back to Italy, and I said to myself I would wait [for] his return.*

*When Mr. Rossi came back from Italy, he came up to Asti. With Mr. Rossi was Percy Morgan, President of California Wine Association, Mrs. Morgan, and Mr. A.R. Morrow, General Superintendent of California Wine Association. They came by the winery. It was chilly, and Mr. Rossi asked me if I had an overcoat for Mrs. Morgan. I had a coat with cape and hood made of camel hair, long hair, so I handed it to Mr. Rossi, and they drove on to Chianti, one of the vineyards. When they came back—it was about five in the afternoon—Mr. Morrow (he was a young fellow then) got off the big rig, with three seats and two horses, and said to me, "Mrs. Morgan wants to buy your coat." So I said, "No, my coat is not for sale."*

*Well, I had the idea in my mind to resign my position, because I resented the fact that one because he was an American was getting more. I said to myself, "If I go to work for Americans, if Americans feel the same way, I'm the one that gets the benefit." So I said to Mr. Morrow, "No, it is not for sale, and I will not sell it." Then I went to the carriage and I said to Mrs. Morgan, "Mr. Morrow asked me to sell this coat. The coat is not for sale, but if you wish to accept it as a present from me, I'd be very happy." So she said "yes." So Mr. Morrow said to me, "Any time you want a job, come and see me." I said to myself "Well, here it's done already." So I said to Mr. Morrow, "I'll be coming to see you next week." So I got the job from Mr. Morrow.*

### **An Offer Too Good to Refuse**

That first job was in San Francisco, receiving the wine and transferring it into storage. California Wine Association was "the big company, carrying some 35 million gallons of wine on hand," shipping out of state back east. Next Mr. Morrow sent Perelli-Minetti to Livermore to the Pioneer Winery (owned by the California Wine Association) to make wine through one vintage. Then it was back to San Francisco and a trip planned up to Asti to see his older brother, Julius.

*Julius had been transferred from the Italian Swiss Colony's Sebastopol winery, and I was going to Asti for a visit with him. I was sitting next to a gentleman with white hair, white moustache, and pock marks, very handsome (his name was Nardini, I found out later), and he asked me where I was going. I said I was going to Asti. Naturally, when you said Asti, you meant wine because at Asti there was nobody except Italian Swiss Colony. He said, "Do you know anything about wine?" I said, "Yes, I'm a graduate winemaker." "Oh," he said, "then you are not going to Asti." I said, "Oh yes, I'm going to." He said, "No, you're not going to Asti, you're going to get off at Healdsburg with me. I'm Mr. Nardini of the Oliveto Wine Company. We're in trouble, and I want you to get off there and we'll telephone your brother, and if necessary we'll send you over by horse and buggy" because that was the transportation in those days.*

*So, I got off at Healdsburg. Lorenzini had charge of the winery. There were three partners, [A.] Nardini, [Domenico] Lorenzini, and [William] Franceschini. Franceschini had charge of the winery in San Francisco. Mr. Nardini was the salesman. He went all over the United States. They had two wineries, the Oliveto Wine Company, which Miss [Edith] Passalacqua own[ed] and where they store[d] the wine for Paul Masson, I think. And they had about seven or eight hundred thousand gallons of wine, lots of wine in those days, all spoiled. And then they had about 3,500 barrels of wine throughout the United States that all had been rejected. So, I did my best to put together a blend, because they were in bad with the bank, they were going broke. So, I put together a blend (I think the first blend was 100,000 gallons) and sent a carload to New Orleans and a carload to Chicago. And the wine was highly accepted. And so, Mr. Nardini oversold that quantity.*



Then after this blend was finished, Mr. Nardini asked me to go to Chicago. So, the company made money from that point there, because we sold all the wine and got the money. Then I went back to Healdsburg to figure what to do with the spoiled wine that was left there. I had them buy 2,000 or 3,000 tons of grapes, and I re-fermented all the wine and made a better wine than that they made from straight grapes. So, things went up right away. The bank was paid. The wine was sold. And they prospered. And I was offered one-fourth of the company, for \$7,500 to be paid by the dividends. I was getting there also \$75 a month and my board.

So, I went to Mr. Rossi, because Mr. Rossi, when I left, said, "Any time I can be of help, any advice you want, come and see me, I'll be glad to give it." So, I went to see Mr. Rossi and I explained to him my position. Mr. Rossi said to me, "Well, there are two alternatives to this one. It's up to you to decide. If these people are honest, then make a deal with them. They have control of the company because they're three. They'd own three-fourths of the company, you'd own one-fourth. But if they want to keep you there and never make any dividend, you'd just be working the rest of your life for the wages. Now it's up to you to decide what to do."

The Simi Company in Healdsburg was in bad shape. And so, through the bank, I was offered a position with Simi, \$250 a month. I took it right away because I had more prospect[s].

Then the [1906] earthquake came.

### **Earthquake Shakes Up Wine Industry**

The shaking in San Francisco destroyed all the wineries in the city; the wine was lost completely. The only wine left was in the surrounding countryside. Wine that did not belong to the companies and formerly priced at 11 or 12 cents a gallon was suddenly worth 28 cents a gallon.

Perelli-Minetti knew Frank Schmidt in Healdsburg had 250,000 gallons of wine. Schmidt had a contract with California Wine Association for 12 cents a gallon.

Returning to the town, Perelli-Minetti found Schmidt wanting to go back to Germany and so he bought that wine for about 50% more than the contract and, by the end of the negotiations, found himself moving to Healdsburg.

As he tells it:

California Wine Association boycotted him [Schmidt], so he decided to sell. First, he wanted me to work for him; he said, "I'm going to Germany, I'll leave you in charge. I may never come back." I said, "No." "Then I'll sell you the place." I said to myself, "I'd like to buy the place. How am I going to raise the money?"

I bought it for \$50,000; \$5,000 down when the escrow was completed, with the understanding any money that was taken in by selling anything on the ranch up to \$10,000 had to be paid on account of the purchase price.

Well, there was the \$5,000 to be paid. I looked into the tanks. I got out about \$800 worth of cream of tartar. There were quite a number of cows. I sold the cows. I think about a couple hundred head. I sold the cows for 3-1/2 cents a pound on the hoof. And so, I practically paid the \$5,000. My son, Mario, has the contract framed—\$50 down on a \$50,000 purchase."

My father said to me, "Now you're in a new country, why don't you brothers get all together?" I said, "Father, it will not work. Each one has different ideas. I have ideas, and then we'll have troubles." Anyway, to please my father I got my two brothers in.

I wanted to build it from the bottom; they wanted to build starting from the top. We were doing very well, but no money and so the end. So, we struggled and struggled and finally we had to close up.

But, if I had been by myself, I'd probably be still in Healdsburg. As they say in Italy—not all bad things hurt you. Anyway, we folded up and I left the ranch with just my shirt, and went to Mexico."

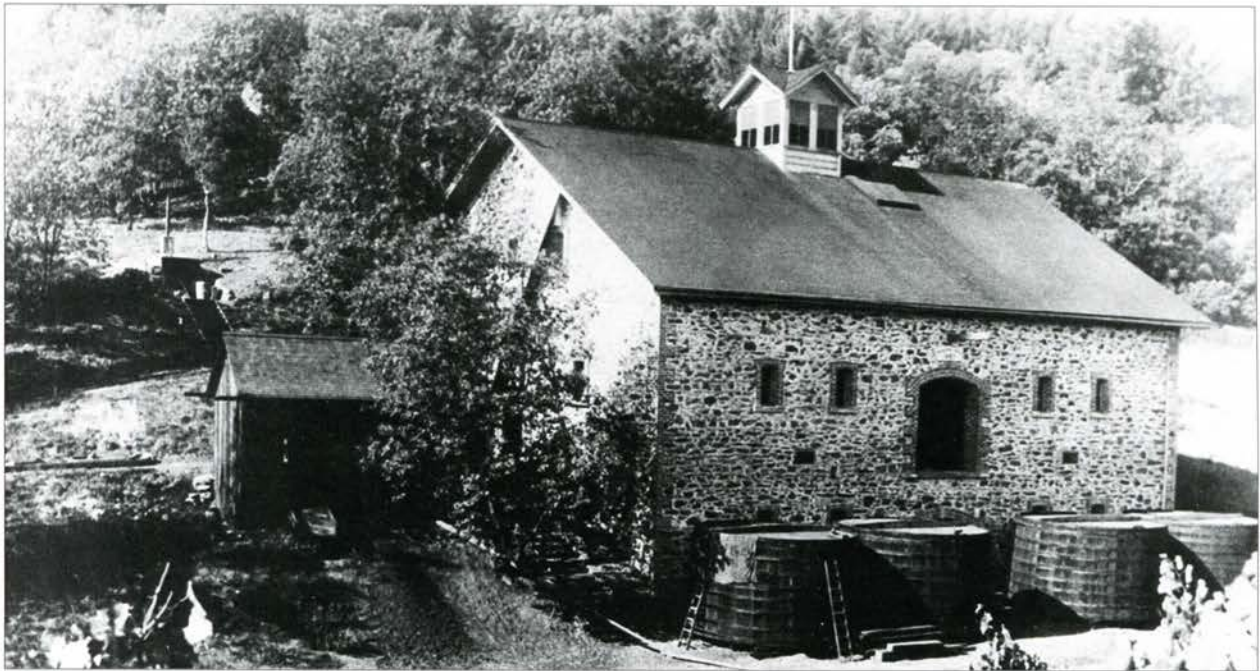
When the revolution started, the family moved to Southern California. After Prohibition, Perelli-Minetti helped to organize and direct a large sales cooperative. This is why he was honored as the "Dean of Winemakers"—always experimenting.

In 1969, he predicted there would be more nationally owned companies. *Too many small ones will wreck each other. You'll have several premium wine producers, small companies or individuals, confining to only the production of their vineyards, no more...Now those people will survive.*

Source:

*Antonio Perelli-Minetti: A Life in Wine Making*, Interview by Ruth Teiser in 1969, California Wine Industry Oral History Project, 1975.





Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Gravity-fed stone Paxton Winery designed by Hamden W. McIntyre, 1887*

## The Paxton Winery

*by Perry Beeson*

*1988 Manuscript on File, Healdsburg Museum*

John A. Paxton was a mining engineer who made a fortune in the California and Nevada mines. In the early 1880s, he built a mansion, along with stables, carriage houses and chicken houses, all of the finest kind, on the Madrona Knoll Rancho. At the time, this was probably the best and finest residence in Sonoma Country.

There were 300 acres in the Rancho, of which 70 acres were planted in grapes. The upper vineyards were in Zinfandel. These were large vineyards for the time. In 1883, there were 54 vineyards in Dry Creek Valley. The average size was 12.6 acres and the largest was 80 acres.

In the summer of 1887, Paxton asked H.W. McIntyre to draw plans for a stone winery on the Rancho. McIntyre was a prominent architect of California. He had designed the Tubbs, Far Niente, Eschol, Inglenook, Greystone and other wineries, including the Wise winery just to the north of this property.

The Paxton Winery was constructed of two and a half stories of native stone. It was built into the side of a hill with walls four feet thick at the base and

two feet thick at the top. Iron rods were built into the walls to reinforce the corners. The first floor posts were ten inches by ten inches. The girders were ten inches by twelve inches, and the joists were three inches by twelve inches. The floors were of double thickness with par affine paper between for dryness.

As the winery was dug into the hillside, the wagons could unload into the crusher, which was on the top floor, allowing for gravity feed to the rest of the building. By the time it was completed, the vineyard acreage had apparently been increased to 90 acres, producing about 180 tons of grapes. The winery had a yearly capacity of 75,000 gallons and a storage capacity of 200,000 gallons. In 1904, 100,000 gallons of wine were shipped to San Francisco.

The earthquake of 1906 so weakened the structure that it never again was used to make wine. The building stood until the winter of 1941 when it collapsed, leaving only the north wall, which stood until 1983 when it, too, collapsed. Now the only remnants of the building are spall ivy covered portions of the north and south walls and the concrete pads where some of the outside tanks were placed.





Source: Napa County Library

*Hamden W. McIntyre, Architect*

## Hamden McIntyre

*reprinted from Napa County Historical Society  
People, Wine and Viticulture, September 10, 2015*

Hamden W. McIntyre, the now legendary Napa Valley winery designer, was born in Randolph, Vermont, in 1834. As a young man he apprenticed as a piano and organ maker, and later was the superintendent of a lumber company before taking up machinery manufacturing. He formally trained as a civil engineer and draftsman while serving as a volunteer in the civil service. Towards the end of his four years of service, McIntyre joined active duty military and served his last six months in the Civil War. After his discharge from the military, Hamden McIntyre studied chemistry, electricity and winemaking where he trained under the guidance of French champagne producer Jules Masson. By the late 1860s, he had been recruited by his brother Dr. Hugh McIntyre to work in San Francisco as part of a team of Vermont Yankees chosen by Hugh to manage the re-organization of the newly formed Alaska Commercial Company. Often referred to by

his honorary title of "Captain," Hamden McIntyre served as a successful agent for the Alaska Commercial Company during the 1870s, and soon became friends with Captain Gustave Niebaum, the youngest owner of the company and a former sea captain who had accumulated a great deal of wealth in the fur trade.

In November of 1880 Gustave Niebaum, with the dream of becoming Napa Valley's finest winemaker, acquired a sizeable amount of acreage in Rutherford. By 1881 Niebaum, who had a great deal of respect and confidence in Hamden McIntyre, offered McIntyre a job as his foreman and general manager at the Inglenook property and to oversee the design and manage the construction of a new winery. McIntyre's decision to work for Niebaum would later prove to be the beginning of an illustrious, albeit brief, career in Napa and Sonoma counties designing gravity-flow wineries.



The new winery building at Inglenook was no ordinary shed structure. Under Niebaum's direction, McIntyre designed a winery unlike any other seen in Napa County. In most cases native fieldstone was used, often quarried in the hills above the winery site. His cellar design typically measured about 120 feet in length by 55 feet in width and became the standard 'McIntyre' footprint. Side-gabled roofs constructed of corrugated iron resting on a sub-roof of wood and concrete floors were other innovations used at the time by Hamden McIntyre. The structures are also unique because of the presence of dormers and symmetrically placed windows rectangular in shape with cut stone sills and lintels and segmented arched doorways and corners with cut stone quoins.



Source: Napa County Historical Society

*Inglenook under construction*

According to the *St. Helena Star* on July 3, 1884, "Capt. McIntyre is discovering a talent for designing cellars that promises to be of great value to our vintners and has already been of advantage on several occasions. He it is [*sic*] who designed Christian Adamson's [*editor's note*—known today as Frog's Leap] and others and his practical knowledge of the requirements of winemaking, together with his mechanical and artistic skill in representing these ideas on paper, will probably make him, if his time permits, the most valuable assistance in that line that we have ever had...H.W. McIntyre has demands from all over the State for his ideas and plans for wine cellars. He is considered to be the best authority on the construction of wine cellars."

By the mid to late 1880s, McIntyre was in demand all over California and was considered to be the best authority on the construction of wine cellars

in the state. In the late 1880s, Gustave Niebaum arranged a meeting between Hamden McIntyre and railroad magnate Leland Stanford who had a dream of building the largest winery complex in the world. This was a challenge for McIntyre, but one he was willing and eager to undertake. Although the vision was not achieved due to Stanford's untimely death in 1893, it was nonetheless a testament to Hamden McIntyre's integrity and reputation. During this period, Hamden McIntyre was also elected President of the Grape Growers and Wine Makers Association where he took on battles between the Viticultural Commissioners and the State University.



Source: Trefethen.com

*McIntyre designed this gravity-flow system for Eshcol Winery (now Trefethen Family Vineyards). A horse-drawn winch brought grapes to the third floor for crushing, gravity carried juice to the second floor for fermenting and wine descended to the first floor for aging.*

McIntyre had completed the designs for over a dozen wine cellars and his term of service as President the Grape Growers and Wine Makers Association by 1887. What began in Inglenook and lead to McIntyre-designed cellars across the Napa Valley that included Greystone Winery (currently the Culinary Institute of America), Trefethen Family Vineyards (formerly Eshcol Winery), Far Niente Winery, Inglenook Winery, Del Dotto Vineyards (formerly Hedgeside Winery), Beaulieu Vineyard (formerly the Ewer & Atkinson Winery) and Chateau Montelena Winery was coming to an end. In the 1890s, Hamden McIntyre and his wife Susan, whom he had married in 1859, returned to his hometown. He participated in several committees in the Vermont State Legislature dedicated to transportation and bridge construction until September 19, 1909, when he died of heart disease on a creek-side path while walking home to lunch.



# More Than a Century of Winemaking at Wilson Winery's Old Tin Barn

by Holly Hoods

## Built to Last

Wilson Winery is celebrating 110 years of winemaking in the old tin barn that Ken and Diane Wilson bought in 1994. This structure was built to last and has a surprisingly colorful past.

In April 1909, Ernest Gaddini hired contractor George Kunz to construct a winery at 1960 Dry Creek Road. Gaddini specified that the building had to be strong and fireproof. He insisted on massive supporting structural timbers and a concrete foundation. Gaddini had reason to be so specific. He had sustained major injuries when trapped in a collapsed building during the 1906 Earthquake.

Ernest Gaddini had an eventful life. Carpenters began construction on his new corrugated iron winery less than a month after his previous winery on Chiquita Road burned to the ground under suspicious circumstances. The Laurel Springs Winery fire was apparently arson—the spark ignited by anger, jealousy and resentment. Worst of all, it was most likely one of his own family members who lit the match!

## Out of the Ashes of Laurel Springs

Ernest Gaddini was the second generation of his family to operate a winery in northern Sonoma County. His father, John, an Italian immigrant, purchased 89 acres of hillside land on what is now Chiquita Road in 1883. John built a wood frame house and planted 50 acres in Zinfandel. He and his wife, the former Elizabeth Passalacqua, had three children: Clara, Ernest and Olive.

In 1902, John purchased 160 acres of land on which to plant more vines and to erect a winery. The beautiful spring-fed land, dotted with bay laurels, inspired Gaddini to name his property "Laurel Springs." John Gaddini's enjoyment of the property was all too brief. He died two years later in 1904.

Eldest daughter, Clara, and her husband, John Auradou, moved onto the Chiquita Ranch and managed the Laurel Springs Winery with Clara's brother, Ernest Gaddini. They ran the winery without incident until one morning in April 1909 when the

Laurel Springs Winery, the fermenting room and the distillery perished.

## A Niece's Accusation

Olive Gaddini Bacigalupi, John and Elizabeth's daughter, minced no words at age 95 when she described the fire. In a 1996 oral history interview with Joe Vercelli, "Ollie" declared that her late father John's "no-good brother, Domy" torched the winery.

Ollie asserted that her father had always supported his "gambling, womanizing deadbeat" brother, Domy. John Gaddini had essentially paid Domy to stay away in San Francisco. When John died in 1904, so did the bankrolling of Domy. He was forced to move up to Healdsburg and work at the winery in order to get any income from the family. Domy brought with him a vicious mastiff dog that he kept chained to the door of the winery.

Domy turned out to be a decent worker; however, he became fixated on his sister-in-law, pestering her to marry him. Elizabeth refused. Domy persisted. Fed up with the constant harassment, Elizabeth finally made her son, Ernest, evict Domy. He left, seething with resentment.

## Domy's Epic Revenge

Ollie Gaddini Bacigalupi was convinced that Uncle Domy took revenge:

*Domy was the only one who could get near the winery because that dog wouldn't allow anybody near it. So in the night, three buildings: the winery, the fermenting room and the distillery, there were three fires, one fire in each building. So that was set, and it was set by Domy, because no one else could have got near the place because that dog would have chewed them up. That dog didn't make a sound! And Domy knew where every faucet was and he opened up every faucet in all those buildings and the tanks didn't have one drop of water.*

Just before the fire, Ernest Gaddini traveled to New York on a wine selling trip. He returned triumphant, having sold all the inventory of wine that



was in the winery, approximately 100,000 gallons. According to Ollie:

*Ernie came back loaded with orders and carloads of new barrels. The whole inventory was sold. Everything that was supposed to be sold burned up. The three buildings at one time, separate fires, so you know it was set! And the winery was full of wine and the barrels, the shipping tanks broke, and wine flew down our creek into Dry Creek and the Russian River. Our wine filled it! We lost everything. The thing burned to the ground because we had no water to fight it. This was almost a total loss. We only got \$10,000 in insurance. It wouldn't even pay for one building. All the new cooperage burned up too, so we almost went broke.*

### **“New Winery on Gaddini Place”**

Fortunately for the Gaddinis, Elizabeth and John had previously purchased another parcel on Dry Creek Road, which Elizabeth now owned free and clear. The Gaddinis took the \$10,000 insurance money, borrowed more money and built on the second Dry Creek Road parcel. That building, today, is Wilson Winery's “tin barn.” In May 1909, the *Healdsburg Enterprise* heralded its construction with a front page headline: “New Winery on Gaddini Place.”

*Work has started on a new winery of 500,000 gallon capacity on the Gaddini Ranch, Dry Creek. The former winery back of Chiquita was recently burned and the new location is much more desirable than to rebuild on the old site. Carpenter George Kunz has the contract, and the new winery will be 64 x 86 feet and 20 feet high. It will be of corrugated iron and ironed inside throughout, making it absolutely fireproof as not a piece of wood will be exposed. The floor will be of cement and the arrangements throughout are in line with modern winery construction. In addition to the large winery building, a distillery, 30 x 40 feet, is also being erected. Everything will be in readiness for the coming season's vintage.*

### **Healdsburg Wine Company**

The new winery was ready just in time to receive the fall harvest in 1909. In August 1910, Elizabeth Gaddini split the Dry Creek acreage, deeding 35 acres to her son, Ernest, and 42 acres to her daughter, Clara Auradou. The winery and

distillery were located on a tiny two-acre “island” in the middle between the two larger parcels. Ownership was passed on to Clara, Ernest and Olive in 1910.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Healdsburg Wine Co., Bonded Winery No. 303*

In August 1911, the Gaddini children sold the winery to the Healdsburg Wine Company. Daniel Scatena, Eugenio Massoni, Eustaquio “Gino” Belli and Ernest Gaddini formed the original company as four equal partners. Ernest still suffered from his earthquake injuries and could barely work because of a persistent wracking cough. He soon sold his quarter of the business to Pasquale Massoni, Eustaquio's son-in-law, and moved to Lake County.

Daniel Scatena, who lived in San Francisco, was a liquor distributor. He came from a distinguished Italian family that was respected in the grocery business and the wine industry. His brothers and cousins founded Roma Wine Company and Scatena Brothers Winery.

### **Bonded Winery #303**

During Prohibition, some wineries were fortunate to secure permits to make legal wine. The Healdsburg Wine Company was thus able to survive. Every month the owners would have to file an inventory form to account for the wine on hand. The permits gave them permission to “sell wine for sacramental or other non-beverage purposes.” The permit also conferred “the authority to purchase and receive wine from others having approved permits to sell the same, such wine to be used only for the purpose of blending with wine manufactured at Bonded Winery #303.”



Stacy Belli, the last surviving member of the wine partnership, sold the Healdsburg Wine Company parcel with the winery and equipment to Louis H. Botlin of San Francisco in 1949. Botlin retained Stacy as manager, and the winery continued as it had for a few more years. The wine was sold by the barrel to regular customers in North Beach and Oakland. After Stacy Belli retired, the winery shut down for almost a decade.

### **New Era of Fredson Winery**

Chris A. Fredson purchased the property in 1966 and put the winery back into production. Chris' father, Israel Fredson, a Swedish immigrant, founded Cypress Hill Winery in 1887 in Windsor on what is now Old Redwood Highway near Eastside Road. Cypress Hill closed during Prohibition, but Chris opened his own winery after Repeal on his ranch in Geyserville. The Chris A. Fredson Winery, Bonded Winery #658, was established at 18821 Old Redwood Highway in 1933.

In 1966, the State of California condemned the Fredson Winery's Geyserville property to make way for the new Highway 101. The following year Chris Fredson purchased the old Healdsburg Wine Company building and shifted his bulk wine operation to Dry Creek.

The winery needed a lot of work to return to operation. Handyman Clyde Taylor was hired to repair the roof, redo the foundations and reconstruct the redwood tanks.

In 1973, Chris' sons, Donald and Leonard, took over ownership and management of the Fredson Winery. Donald concentrated on the vineyards and Leonard on the winemaking. Chris' wife Josephine deftly handled the tally sheets, keeping track of the incoming grapes by name of grower, type of varietal, weight and payment. The Fredson Winery did a lot of custom crushing.

The Fredsons never bottled under their own label, preferring to sell bulk wine wholesale. For more than 20 years, the Fredsons sold 300,000 gallons of wine a year to Peter Mondavi at Charles Krug Winery in Napa Valley. They never signed a contract; the business "was done on a handshake," recalled Josephine. They bought grapes from small growers in Dry Creek and Geyserville areas, producing blends of Zinfandel, Carignane and Petite Syrah. They used redwood, open-top fermenters and

topped the tanks with a hand pump, recalled Bob Fredson, Chris' grandson.

### **Wilson Winery**

In 1994, Ken and Diane Wilson, owners of Wilson Artisan Wines, bought the Fredson Winery and gave it a new look, as well as a new name. The old tin barn had been vacant and out of operation for a few years, so the Wilsons made some repairs and a few enhancements to the building. They also introduced the first tasting room on the property. With consistent quality and award-winning wines, Wilson Winery has become one of the most popular destinations in Dry Creek Valley.

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# ITALIAN SWISS COLONY

Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Italian Swiss Colony logo, c. 1900*

## Italian Swiss Colony: Utopian Folly to Raging Commercial Success

by Bo Simons

The buildings and grounds of Italian Swiss Colony still hover east of Highway 101 past Geyserville, sweltering in anonymity and corporate limbo the last few decades. These airplane hangar-sized buildings bristle inside with some museum quality oak and redwood tanks complete with mammoth aged, but functioning, wooden cylinders nestled among modern jacketed steel tanks.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Aerial view of the Italian Swiss Colony facilities in Asti, 1947*

This landmark is still a working wine production facility. Constellation Brands, a multinational drinks conglomerate, sold the property a few years ago. Now E. & J. Gallo owns the buildings and uses it as a production facility. It still produces wine, including one labeled Souverain (another Sonoma County wine history saga).

Italian Swiss Colony stands out as the most significant winery in Sonoma County in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and, it could be argued, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well. They made history in the wine world in the

1880s and '90s as one of the first California wineries to establish a marketable and enduring national and international brand. It was also one of the biggest early wineries in California. Its pre-Prohibition wines garnered acclaim in the East and in Europe nearly a century before the fabled "Judgment of Paris" in 1976, helping to counter the poor opinion many held of California wine.

Italian Swiss Colony's early luster and historical significance have been tarnished by its post-Prohibition rebirth as something less than it was. Italian Swiss Colony came back, but it came back in the 1950s and '60s as a jug wine producer, promoted by saturation television commercials featuring "that little ole winemaker, ME!" It was also a popular tourist destination in California, second only to Disneyland in the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### The Beginning

Italian Swiss Colony owes its birth to an Italian immigrant named Andrea Sbarboro. He was five years old when his father moved the family from Acero, near Genoa, Italy, to New York in 1844.

Eight years later, the streetwise thirteen-year-old Sbarboro traveled with a family member on the arduous journey to Gold Rush San Francisco of 1852. They journeyed through the Isthmus of Panama, going partly by train, partly by foot and partly by canoe paddled by natives wearing "the garb that Adam wore" according to a vivid and colorful typewritten memoir Sbarboro wrote in 1911.

An old Italian they met in the jungle, part of a discouraged party of immigrants returning to Italy,



looked the young Sbarboro up and down, clapped him on the back and prophesied, "Here is one (who) will make a fortune in California." Sbarboro never forgot that prediction and ultimately lived up to it.

Upon arrival in San Francisco, Sbarboro's brother put him to work as a bookkeeper in his grocery businesses. In a short span, Sbarboro took over the store and went on to acquire other businesses and to teach English.

With money earned from teaching and the grocery business, Sbarboro made shrewd real estate and other investments. He became comfortably rich, acquired a gaudy home, married and was later widowed. Sbarboro made return trips to Italy, and on his second old country sojourn met and married a new wife.

### **A Business Model**

Back in San Francisco in 1875, a friend asked him to attend a meeting in West Oakland where a savings and loan club was to be formed. Sbarboro saw this early version of the neighborhood savings and loan association as a way to help the Italian working class families in San Francisco become homeowners.

On July 21, 1875, Sbarboro organized his first savings and loan association. The idea was to recruit working families in a neighborhood as members and enlist them to pool their meager assets through dues of \$5 to \$50 a month. Then the club would lend their shared money out to members to build homes for their families.

Over the course of 30 years, the associations raised well over \$6,000,000 and built over 2,500 homes in and around San Francisco.

### **Business Model Modified**

In 1881, Sbarboro had an idea. He brought in other leaders of the San Francisco Italian community to help form Italian Swiss Agricultural Colony. More *contadini* (Italian peasants) fresh from the Southern Italian farmlands, had begun showing up in San Francisco. Most were seeking refuge as the breakdown of feudalism swept Southern Italy in the wake of Risorgimento, the messy wars of unification among the city states of Italy.

Unfortunately, these *contadini* lacked the trade skills of the urban poor that Sbarboro had been assisting with his savings and loan societies.

Sbarboro reasoned it would be good to put the *contadini* to work in some kind of farming. The key was grapes and wine. According to his memoir, Sbarboro happened to read a report of the Board of State Viticultural Commissioners. There he learned that a mature vineyard might produce five tons of grapes an acre. One ton of grapes sold for \$30, and the cost of production was only \$20 an acre, leaving a profit of \$130 an acre, the equivalent of almost \$3,000 today.

The report gave Sbarboro the impetus to take the neighborhood savings and loan club template that worked so well for urban Italians in San Francisco and modify it for the *contadini*. He planned to form a company to farm grapes, with agricultural colonists, all men, doing the farm work and living communally. After several years of enforced saving, they would earn enough shares to trade for land of their own from the Colony at below market rates. After some years of hard work, each would have his own little farm.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection  
*Andrea Sbarboro, 1915*

Sbarboro got prosperous Italians in San Francisco as investors and the *contadini* as workers who would eventually become shareholders. The articles decreed shareholders could purchase from five to fifty shares. For each share, a shareholder agreed to pay \$1 a month for the following five years.



2,250 shares were issued, producing an income of \$2,250 a month. Sbarboro said when he had \$10,000 in the treasury, he would search throughout the state for a suitable site. He wanted well over a thousand acres and railroad access. At that time, many big pieces of California real estate were owned by the Central Pacific Railroad. They liked the scale of Sbarboro's thinking, and they took him and two other directors all around the Central Valley and Southern California by rail to inspect their holdings throughout the late spring and early summer of 1881. Sbarboro was not satisfied. Then he came north to Cloverdale to look at property south of town.

Initially, Sbarboro's Italian Swiss Colony vision was to make a grape farm with the labor provided by *contadini* colonists who would do the work and be partially paid in stock that could be redeemed for cash or land after five years.

*I summoned a number of the laborers and explained the plan to them. Their wages would be from thirty to forty dollars a month, with good food and wine at their meals, which was a necessity for them, and comfortable houses to sleep in. But, in order to inspire an interest in the work and desiring that the colony should be strictly cooperative, I explained that each laborer must subscribe to at least five shares of stock, to pay for which, five dollars a month would be deducted from his wages.*

The *contadini* did not buy into the "share" business and demanded full pay, no deductions.

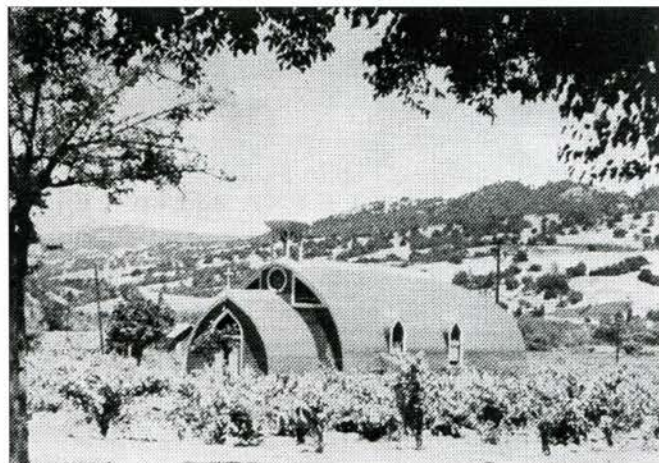


Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

#### *Constructing wine barrels at Asti*

Sbarboro tried reason, emotional argument and pleading and finally gave up. He revised his bylaws to make Italian Swiss Agricultural Colony a regular stock company with investors and employees, rather his imagined colonist-investor-employees,

something that had a whiff of the utopian. The employees, however, still lived in company housing and ate meals together with wine. The employees were still agricultural colonists, and the Colony was very paternal.



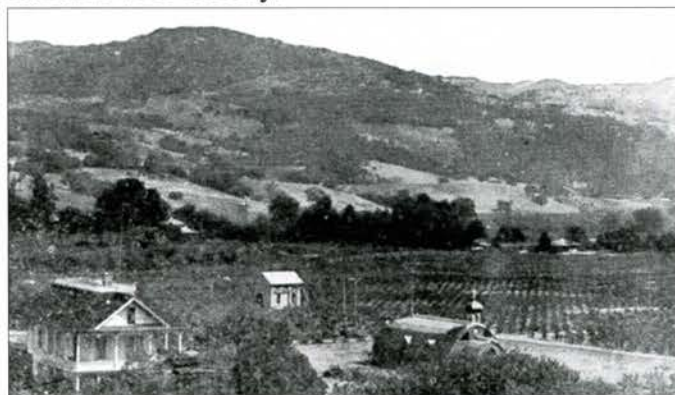
Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

#### *The Little Church of Italian Swiss Colony*

Many of these original colonists stayed on at Italian Swiss Colony until Prohibition and many came back after the company reformed following Prohibition. They christened the newly formed town "Asti." It had a church, stores and eventually houses for married working families.

#### **Italian Swiss Colony's True Legacy**

Many other Italian immigrants came to Northern Sonoma County and became vineyardists and/or winemakers because they had friends and family at Asti. This represents the true legacy of Italian Swiss Colony.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

#### *Town of Asti and Italian Swiss Colony vineyards, 1912*

The Seghesios descended from Italian Swiss Colony colonists. Joe Pelanconi, who has contributed



much to the Healdsburg Museum, traces his family's roots back to Italian Swiss Colony. The Rossis, Mazzonis, Baiocchis, Trusendis, and Domenichellis were all among the early Italian Swiss Colony people.

And the colony itself, the small "c" colony, was an outpost of Italy, a spill-over village and an enclave of rural Italian immigrants that grew to encompass Northern Sonoma County. They were the beachhead. They brought over cousins and nephews; not all worked for Italian Swiss Colony, but all became citizens and made Northern Sonoma County rich with musical names and the distinctive Italian flavor of Healdsburg, Geyserville, Cloverdale, Alexander Valley, Dry Creek Valley and Russian River. The region owes much to this big winery.

### **Rough Start**

The first few years presented one crisis after another. They planted 100,000 vines the first year, vines of great varieties that Sbarboro had managed to acquire from Italy, France, Hungary and the Rhine. Few of these first cuttings survived being eaten by sheep.

The next year a number more were planted only to be partially destroyed by grasshoppers.

When the vines came to maturity in the fourth year, they should have started bearing commercial quantities of grapes. They failed to produce adequately. However, that meager yield was a good quality, and it was succeeded by a substantial crop of sound quality in their fifth year, 1885.

They felt their troubles were over as they shipped grapes to the wine merchants in San Francisco. Those merchants were the sole market for much of the wine grapes in California. Instead of giving \$30 a ton as the article that had spurred Sbarboro into starting the Colony had promised, the merchants offered eight dollars minus four for freight charges.

Sbarboro called a directors' meeting and asked for a further assessment of \$10 a share, gaining \$22,500 to build a 300,000 gallon winery. Thus, the Italian Swiss Agricultural Colony became winemakers as well as wine growers.

### **Conquering the Problems**

Sbarboro got the winery completed and ready for the 1887 vintage. Unfortunately, that vintage was a disaster. Fiercely hot weather sent sugars soaring

and fermentations "got stuck" (stopped prematurely). Sbarboro and company concluded that making wine in this quantity required more than intuitive *paisano* skills. They needed a really good winemaker and general manager.

He found one in Pietro C. Rossi (1855-1911). Rossi came from a winemaking family and had trained as a chemist. Later, his twin sons, Robert and Edmund, would provide a link to the future between Italian Swiss Colony and the Rossi family. He immediately put the cellars in order and started turning out quality wine.

Their next hurdle was to remove the San Francisco wine merchants who were strangling their profits. Most wineries sold to the San Francisco merchants who paid little. Whatever quality a small producer had was lost in the mix and anonymity of whatever blends and labels the merchants sold that season.

Italian Swiss Colony's answer was to set up its own wine depot in San Francisco in 1888. Soon they expanded their advantage with bottling plants and agents in cities back East to control their marketing and distribution.



Source: Healdsburg Museum Collection

*Advertisement featuring the trademark Chianti-style Tipo wine in a traditional straw basket*

Rossi developed Tipo Chianti, which became their signature product, affordable Chianti from mostly Sangiovese grapes.

### **Becoming a Giant**

The 1890s saw the rise of Italian Swiss Colony to be a true giant and a quality producer. It also saw bank failures and credit crunches and the falling together of a number San Francisco wine merchants into the California Wine Association (CWA) which sought to absorb Italian Swiss Colony.



In response, Rossi formed his own group of growers. The California Winemakers Corporation (CWC) was designed to concentrate the power of those who actually grew the grapes. The CWA blended, bottled, distributed and marketed.

In 1896 Italian Swiss Colony bought more acreage and built a facility in Madera specifically for dessert wines, leaving the fine table winemaking to the Asti plant. As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century began, Italian Swiss Colony, in the words of wine historian Charles Sullivan, "was the most well known national trade brand" and "made more really sound high quality trade wine than any other wine enterprise in the United States."

### The Giant Stumbles

Italian Swiss Colony continued to grow in the new century. Tipo went from being a huge brand to a gigantically huge brand. Italian Swiss Colony entered and won international prizes for their varietal wines. Sbarboro focused more of his attention on his

banking enterprises in the city. Rossi, more than a winemaker, more than a manager, with an increasing number of shares, became the leader of the winery.

When Rossi died in a buggy accident in 1911, a power vacuum was created and Italian Swiss Colony stumbled into Prohibition as a part of CWA. Its assets were sold as that huge hollow shell collapsed.

Parts of Italian Swiss Colony were put back together after repeal, but that's another story.

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